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ABSTRACT

The processes involved in drama and the dramatic play of children are essentially the same in that they rely on an imitation of nature, involve a transformation of reality through imagination, connect seemingly irrelevant elements creatively, and bring a temporary, limited order to an emotional experience. When child's play is used as a basis for the education of children or as a starting point for mature creative work, it is essential that its complexity remain intact and that it not be decoded or oversimplified. For students and practitioners of theatre and drama to express themselves creatively, it is not enough to use the techniques of playing; they must recover, value, and exercise their own innate mental playfulness. (A bibliography of books and articles on play is included.) (MAI)

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DRAMATIC PLAY: ROOT MEANING OF DRAMA/THEATRE

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Thank you. I feel very honored, very excited to be given this opportunity to talk with you today—you, who already know and care so much about this vital work that we are all involved in.

I want to begin at the beginning, with a child story—the one about the boy who, feeling a little afraid, a little lonesome one night, as we all do sometimes, told his mother that he'd like to join her and his father in bed. His mother, though, didn't really go with the idea, so she tried an alternative reassurance: "You know, you're never really alone; God is always with you." Then the child said, "Well, but I'd rather sleep with someone that has a face." And another one: a five-year-old in a hospital waiting room was climbing up onto the back of a couch next to the wall. When her mother asked her what she was doing, the child answered matter-of-factly, "I'm trying to take Jesus down off the cross."

Children—like artists and scientists—do tend naturally, audaciously, to make the abstract concrete, "to give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name," to connect the general with the particular. I want to try to follow their example here today. It's not easy, with so complex a subject. (When I moaned to my husband, "What can I do? It's so VAST," he wisely connected me back to the work at hand with an old family saying: "Never mind; with the time you've got, just make sure it doesn't turn out half vast.")

But the awesome complexity must be faced. About 15 years ago a liner from The London Times happened into my life to crystallize the struggle I was having with my work. It became a motto to me: "Understanding the atom bomb is child's play, compared with understanding child's play."

An unforgettable favorite cartoon of mine pictures two little boys in knee britches sailing paper airplanes around the kitchen while their school-books lie abandoned on the round table; Mama, aproned, hands on hips, is saying: "Orville and Wilbur, stop playing around and get busy on your home-work!" Play can truly equal work in dignity and value, and it is preparation for later life. Some ten-year-old boys even explained to me, "You can die without really dying....It's something that happens to everybody sooner or later, so it's good to know something about it ahead

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of time." To rehearse not only life, but death: a long perspective and a keen insight for the first decade of living. Plato told us 2500 years ago that education must begin early, but in a playful manner, and—as we think back into roots—it may not be accidental that the Greek words for play and for education are almost identical (paidia and paideia). Johan Huizinga, in his important book, Homo Ludens, says that "the great instinctive forces of civilized life...law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom, and science...all are rooted in the primaeval soil of play....Genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization." Richard Courtney claims that dramatic play "is the centre of modern creative education: all arts spring from it and all scientific methods evolve through it." I suspect that education really is the transformation of tuition into intuition.

William J. J. Gordon, of the Cambridge Synectics Group, believes that:

Play, as an attitude of mind and an ability on an adult level . . . operates in terms of the adult individual's willingness to recall and to re-enter the child state. . . . This plasticity of awareness and consciousness is characteristic of the child's approach to the world's multiplicity; thus, as in learning how to play, so in learning how to accept the irrelevant, the individual is involved in relearning, on an adult level, techniques which were "natural" in the intuitive vision of childhood...necessary to creativity on an adult level.

This connecting process to which Gordon refers—the juxtaposition or combination of seemingly irrelevant elements—is central to both play and the creative process. In response to the "Back To Basics" movement, we need to remember that the root meaning of "cognition" is "to shake together." Goethe urged us to "connect, connect, always connect!" Einstein (in a brief, brilliant reply to a letter asking him to explain how he thought) wrote that "this rather vague . . . combinatory play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought." According to Bruner, all

forms of creativity are the result of such a combinatory process, and Koestler reminds us that seeing a connection between the oceans' tides and the moon—considered madness even by other scientists at the time—is a classic example of the mental play characterizing creative thought.

From Aristotle through Rousseau and Schiller to Freud, Piaget, Bertrand Russell: the list of brilliant minds recognizing and studying play as the wellspring of human achievement is dazzling.

Now, focussing on our own concentration, it seems even clearer that the purposes and processes of theatre and drama are essentially identical with those of play. Manifestly, the physical, technical elements of theatre are explored in childhood: the dress-ups and disguises that primitively play at costuming; the boxes and old sheets, the sticks and bottle-caps that roughly function as settings and props; the experiments with sound and light—all are played with, sometimes quite elaborately.

But on a deeper level, the very processes of drama and theatre are essentially the same as those of dramatic playing, and derive from them. Imitation—"holding the mirror up to nature," so as to see it truly and from a fresh angle—is the basis of both play and drama. An eight-year-old girl explained succinctly, "We do what we know."

And she went on to say, "—and we continue with our imagination. We aren't old enough to know all the real things to do, so we just make them up." In the years that I've been thinking about that statement, it has come to have more and more meaning for me, as I realize more deeply that we never come to know "all the real things," and that growth toward, reaching toward more knowledge is constant and endless. I remember as a child being keenly conscious of growing, of how much there was yet to know and become (the pencil marks on the wall: am I there yet? Am I grown up yet?). Then, instead of how far up have I grown, how far out? Am I as broad here as I'm going to be? And then, carrying a child inside me: is this as big as we need to be before birthing—is it time? Are we there yet? I've been happy to see that we are lately recognizing more fully this Fact of Life: that development continues throughout all the stages of life (the presence in airports of a popular book like Passages is a sign). For decades we have thought of childhood and adolescence as periods of crucial

growth and change. Now we are becoming more aware that at 30 and 40 and 50, like the eight-year-old, we still "don't know all the real things to do," and still therefore must "make them up." We recognize the necessity for "continuing with our imagination," as we did in childhood.

That brings us to the other central process of drama/theatre that is rooted in play: transformation. One of my most cherished treasures is a 2" by 4" booklet, crudely made of rough brown paper towelling from the school lavatory, with black bats and Spell Appointment Book crayoned on the cover. My daughter Pamela made it when she was ten, during fifth-grade math class. Several of the pages are labelled "Transformation"; here's one example:

Every day, any time

Fly around and turn at least five people into stone

Object [sort of a lesson plan]: Daily Exercise

Daily exercise in transformation! That's the key, I think: children constantly, spontaneously exercise their minds in this way. In Flint, Michigan, one of the city parks has an area called Safetyville; it's a miniature driving practice range, with stop signs, railroad tracks, and so on. Each child gets to drive a small pedal car around the roads. Well, one little girl got so excited that when her turn came to get into the open-bottomed car, she had what we euphemistically call "an accident." She called the officer over, pointed to the wet spot, and said coolly, "This car is leaking gas." That is savoir-faire!

These children really are practicing the same transformational thinking that was needed to change soybeans into tile floors and charcoal into filters for submarines. And clearly, these are the same transformational powers that can change a theatre stage into the French Quarter to which A Streetcar Named Desire carries us, or a schoolroom into the world inside Alice's Looking Glass.

Freud considered art a continuation—even a substitute—for the natural art of childhood, and the artist a person "who uses the world of fantasy as a child does in his play." In fact, the root meaning of "illusion"—which is the essence of drama/theatre—is "in-play," and I suggest that we have a lot to learn about aesthetic distance and empathy from play. And Bettelheim says that the child "reenacts in play the difficulties that he has encountered in reality." Certainly that is one

function of drama as well. Catharsis—the purgation of strong emotion—is effected in both play and drama. Huizinga writes: "Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life, play [like art] brings a temporary, a limited perfection; it creates order, is order." By thus playing with order and perfection in the other world of illusion, we practice accepting or changing the world that we call real. The struggle of drama and of play, and their powers to clarify and distill, equip us for the struggle of living.

So, as Von Lange puts it, play is the art of childhood, and art is the mature form of play. What has puzzled me is that, while philosophers, psychologists, biologists, anthropologists—thinkers from a wide range of disciplines, over a long history of many centuries—have been probing the meanings and importance of play, we in theatre and drama have not seemed to pay as much attention to it as might be expected. Oh, it's true that Barrault has said that play is a necessity of and training for life. Stanislavski said that "an artist remains to the end of his days a great child, but should he lose the immediacy of a child's point of view of life, he ceases to be an artist." Shaw observed that a man does not stop playing because he grows old, but rather grows old because he stops playing.

In our own special branch of theatre/drama, where understanding of these connections ought reasonably to be the most thorough, Corinne Brown did write as long ago as 1929 that "drama is dramatic play grown up," and most of our respected books on child drama have taken note of play as relevant to our work. Pemberton-Billing and Clegg acknowledge that "in drama the work is based on the child's natural desire to express himself through play and make-believe." Pressnal writes that "it would be a disservice to the art of the theatre to make too great a distinction between formal proscenium, awe-inspiring plays and the kinetic play of the playground." Jonathan Levy realizes that "children's theatre can be—and, at its best, is—as quirky, subtle, funny, serious, various, and playful as children are themselves." In the writings of Ward, Burger, Goldberg, and many others, this awareness of the relevance of play has been evident.

Yet I suspect that we might all agree that we have barely begun to understand the implications of play for art and education. Bettelheim says that many adults understand that play is—as Freud called it—"the language of childhood," but he asks how many of us know the grammar and syntax of the language of play?

Our work has come a long way in a short time. When I first encountered this organization that brings us together here today, there was a separation, even a polarity between many specialists in creative drama and those in theatre; there were movements to divide completely. Of course, there are real differences, but that schism always troubled me. Now at last we have official documents recognizing the concept of the continuum from "drama in its natural state [that's play!]" to guided drama, to participation theatre/drama, to theatre." The idea of the organic development of theatre art and involvement drama from dramatic play, is finally coming of age. I felt authentic joy at the CTAA Wingspread Conference on Theatre In Children's Education, when we included in our reported statements the premise that I see as so basic: "Drama and theatre should be central to the arts, for dramatic imagination is natural to the human being . . . the mental act of transformation is a major mode of learning."

But, while there is much progress to celebrate, we have not come nearly far enough in our understanding of child's play. In children's drama/theatre, play has been mentioned—even honorably mentioned—and yet all of those other specialists seem to be way ahead of us in probing the implications and applications of play from their varieties of expertise. And I've wondered if the explanation for this paradox might be that to us who work in drama and theatre with and for the young, the power of dramatic play is so obvious that we have taken it too much for granted. Maybe we have assumed that we know as much as we need to know about natural dramatic play, and have consequently blocked the deeper, more detailed understanding that we are so specially equipped to reach for. If so, recognizing this problem could be the beginning of solving it.

And, in trying to figure all of this out, I think we need always to remember how new this particular work of ours is. Of course, its roots are in the beginnings of human history, but in its present forms in this country it is a phenomenon of the twentieth century. There are people here in this theatre at this moment who have had a long and prominent part in the shaping of this history. I think that this is one reason why

we all find this work so exciting. I've always been afraid that I would never have made it crossing the continent in a prairie schooner, or the Atlantic on the Mayflower (all those maggots in the water barrel!), but I feel the exhilaration of real pioneering in this work that we are all engaged in (or even married to?), with so much uncharted territory yet to explore.

And then, in trying to understand why we haven't gone further in our study and use of this natural resource of dramatic play in our work, it struck me that American children's theatre and drama had a breech birth. Now, there's nothing wrong with that—one of my own children was breech-birthed, and has come out beautifully. It's just that there's some turning around to be done. Let me try to explain what I mean. Because of the place and the time in history of their early development, children's drama and theatre seem to have backed out of a somewhat limited educational and theatrical tradition. Some of our most influential earlier leaders—once imbued with the conviction that theatre and drama needed to be brought into the lives of children—naturally drew on their own knowledge and experience of education and of adult theatre for their work, and handed it down to children. For instance, because the theatre tradition most familiar to them was centered in the particular conventions of the "well-made" play, they tended to scale down that form to a miniaturized "well-made" play for children. Consider, for example, how many of those plays had three acts—even if some of the acts ran only ten or fifteen minutes—with two intermissions; whereas it's widely understood now that a theatre event for young audiences can, if rightly wrought and rhythmmed and age-aimed, go on effectively for an hour and a half, or more, without intermission. (When we go back to studying children's natural playing, questions of concentration spans, of time concepts, of flexibility of focus and frequency of change, take on new dimensions.) It's interesting to consider, in fact, that if a wider range of adult theatre conventions is drawn on, freer, more fluid treatments of time and space are included; Shakespeare, for instance, forthrightly directs his audience to join in transforming "this wooden 'O'" to "the vasty fields of France," and in the battle-act of Richard III, five different locales for as many scenes

are assumed, with the "My kingdom for a horse!" scene running much less than a minute. This free-flowing, cinematic form may be much closer to the nature and rhythms of child's play, and to those of the dream-states so conducive to creative thought, than are the simpler patterns and structures still so common in plays for the young.

It also occurs to me that this small-scale Sardoudledom penetrated back even to early creative drama work, which often tended to become just a rougher, shorter, unscripted "well-made" play--that is, a sort of imitation of that children's theatre which in its turn was an imitation of a certain imitative adult dramaturgy. I remember reading about and observing "creative" drama sessions impeded by tedious overexplication, repetitious play-throughs and critiques to "make it better," and well-meant "directing" which sometimes seemed more like censorship. (A child says, "And then they saw these MONSTERS—" and the leader says regretfully, "Oh, dear, do we really want monsters?" and the children lapse back into either teacher-approved or their own private thoughts.) Creative drama, I think we'd all agree, must be of the players, by the players, and for the players, that their native powers may not perish. And it may not need plainly identified or balanced beginnings, middles, ends. When the forms and contents are imposed mainly by adult consciousness in laid-on patterns, that is essentially backwards: a breach of nature. The roots are in natural dramatic play, so it makes sense to connect back to those roots if we hope to discover organically developing dramatic experiences, whether informal or formal, experiential drama or theatre.

The point is that real art imitates life itself, not other art forms. If play is the art of childhood and art is the adult form of play, we must engage in playing that is truly an art form and not a cheap imitation. No facsimile is reasonable. Santayana has said that "an artist is a dreamer consenting to dream of the real world." I'm forcibly reminded of this truth when I recall the ASSITEJ Congresses, for instance. I saw some memorable theatre in Paris, but more vivid is the real-life scene when, tearing late out of a train station, a New York friend rushed up to a Parisian taxi driver and demanded in school-girl French, "Où est le métro?"

To ask a cabbie where the subway is: that's chutzpah! And at a performance of The She Wolf, Anna Magnani and Zeferelli taking curtain calls for fully 25 minutes—the longest standing ovation I've ever stood and rejoiced* in (it was better than the play)—where I really understood the meaning of "assister à": the audience helping with the theatre, not merely going to it. Participation, yes! And in Spain, more than by the performances, I was moved by the children playing jump-rope in front of the cathedral in Barcelona; by seeing (with my own naked eyes) Picasso's school-books, full of bull fights drawn all over the margins, and various ways of printing and writing and arranging his name played with on the young drawings; by people spontaneously round-dancing to live music in the streets—old, young, thin, fat, just dropping their shopping bags and joining arms to dance.

Life itself far surpasses imitated art, and we need to go on paying the close, constant attention to the primary sources of life that characterizes childhood. I remember that when I was a child we were always using the command, the invocation, "Be-tend--". Not "pre" but "BE" . . . it wasn't until a long time after I became literate that I realized the word which had been our theme was supposed to be "pretend." This means something to my mind. We were, in our playing, passionately serious, penetrating essences: states of being. Existence and grasping: betending. It made deep sense to my child-mind, and it makes sense to me still.

So it seems clear that if we are interested in children, we must look to childhood (our own as well as others'), and listen to children, as a matter of course. But as we attend to their play, and to its implications for art and life, we must never violate its complexity by presuming to "decode" or oversimplify it. Jung says that "the creative aspect of life which finds its clearest expression in art baffles all attempts at rational formulation. . . . The creative act . . . will forever elude the human understanding." Tolkien says of the unconscious world of fantasy that "it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible." Frustrating as it may be, if we seek truth we are bound to respect the fact that thought and feeling are mostly invisible and inaudible, and that these complex inner processes do not need to be measurable, verifiable, or even observable in order to be real and significant. Anais Nin writes

*Root meaning of ovation!

that "the one who seeks only analytical clarity remains a tourist, a spectator." I think that as our work moves into a more advanced stage of its development, as we seek in new ways to expand our knowledge, we need to beware that pressures for "accountability" do not force us into the dishonesty of shallow research, of pseudo-science. A recent conversation with a perceptive nine-year-old flooded me with a fresh awareness of this danger. She told me that, immediately after a performance, a college student sitting next to her in the audience had quizzed her (notebook in hand): "Do you like slap-stick?". The child said to me: "Well, I thought to myself, 'Does he mean an actual slap-stick, or broad physical farce, or—you know what I mean—that's a complicated question; it all depends. . . .". And as we talked along, she explained many more of her thoughts about the performance and about the quizzer. When I asked what answer she had given to the student, the child replied, "Oh, I just said, 'Sometimes.'." Not a very reliable clue to that child's intricate responses. I suspect that most people (whatever their ages) would have trouble articulating their inner reactions to an artistic experience, especially in condensed forms (even if they did not feel that their privacy was being invaded).

I don't mean to condemn valid, genuinely objective study; quite the opposite, I wish to encourage it. But we who work in the arts and the humanities must be wary of amateur science. We must resist the temptation to give false answers at a time when we are just ready to ask true questions. We need to be as tough-mindedly skeptical of pseudo-science as we are of pseudo-art. Gifted scientists speak of "the leap of intuition," and Dirac (ranked with Newton and Einstein) says, "Who wants to set up all of his work with absolute accuracy is not likely to get very far in physics." Erikson, in Toys And Reasons, writes that "true make-believe may play with facts, but it cannot lie, while fake reality may . . . seem to master the facts but it never tells the truth." As science joins art, as research joins search, we need, now as always, to try to stay honest (not pretentious but betentious).

If child's play does contain the seeds of mature creative work, and if the arts of drama and theatre are rooted in the natural dramatic playing

of childhood, then it is vital that we seek and find as many of the connections as possible. We must draw on what Erikson calls "the lasting heritage of child's play . . . a certain maturing playfulness which is endowed with adult competence . . . and heightens the sense of reality." Students and practitioners of drama/theatre cannot start merely with techniques of gaming or acting or playwriting; they must first recover and exercise and value that innate mental playfulness so necessary to art and learning, the creative process natural in play. Barrault tells us that "youth is a malady in the course of which you either remain living, if you protect your childhood, or you die, if, your childhood stifled, you become adult." A matter of life and death, not to be cut off from our roots. A natural law.

So there is much more to the connecting of play and drama/theatre yet to be discovered, understood, and used. But if we stay in touch with childhood we can share into any age Paul Hazard's vision of young, developing minds: "They see a whole new world opening before them—a world in which they will still be playing, but at far vaster games."

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A PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF BOOKS AND ARTICLES ON PLAY

Note: This list includes works dealing with a range of theory as well as practice, with different periods (mainly of the twentieth century) represented for their historic and in some cases their intrinsic interest. There is a rapidly growing body of literature focussing on play in therapy; relating to a special expertise not within my realm, only a very small sampling of the better known and less technical of these are included in this bibliography.

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